

The Vision of Perry Dunlap Smith

by Nancy Geyer



The North Shore Country Day School



Perry Dunlap Smith and Sam Howe (age 4 and later alumnus of North Shore Class of 1973). The photo was taken the day of the groundbreaking ceremony for the addition to the Upper School in 1959.

Preface

Among the Punjabi villagers in northwestern India there is a saying: "You never really know who a man is until you know who his grandfather and his ancestors were." I suggest you never really know what a school is until you know the founders and what their vision was. I must have been a member of the faculty for a year or more before I became aware of Perry Dunlap Smith, the founding headmaster of North Shore. His presence gradually began to take form in my consciousness, constructed from fragments of conversations with old-timers and images from early yearbooks. I had, however, noticed his picture in the Laird Bell Room with a shovel over his shoulder, walking across campus holding the hand of a little boy. It was several years afterwards that I realized how well that image captured the ideals for which Mr. Smith stood.

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School Historian



The Vision of Perry Dunlap Smith

Perry Smith, a young man just barely into his 30's, was brought to Winnetka by a group of parents who were dissatisfied with the public school situation in Winnetka and chose not to send their children to a boarding school in the east. He was selected as headmaster of the new school because he was an outstanding teacher at Francis Parker School in Chicago and seemed to be a person of remarkable vision.

He came from a well-to-do family. His father's wealth was based on Chicago real estate. Young Perry had attended, through grade five, a Chicago public elementary school characterized by high regimentation and little creativity. It was an awakening for him when he came under the influence of Colonel Francis Parker at his experimental Chicago Institute where the idea of the development of the whole child through learning by doing was the mode of education.

Life has a way of creating synchronous moments, and one of them took place at Parker's School. Perry Smith's brother, a year or two younger, was in the same class as Carleton Washburne, who came to Winnetka the same year (1919)

Perry did, and was to revolutionize the Winnetka public school system. Smith and Washburne became close friends even though, in a sense, they were operating rival school systems. As members of the Progressive Education Movement, they collaborated on education research and at times defended each other publicly because their ideas were not always accepted by local interest groups.

In 1932 Perry Smith and Carleton Washburne founded the Graduate Teachers College of Winnetka along with Flora Cooke, the principal of Francis Parker School. The college became internationally recognized, and while enrollment was never large, students came from all over the world. In its twenty-two years of existence the college had a profound impact on the field of education. Graduates became outstanding teachers as well as headmasters, deans, and college professors.

There were many ways in which Washburne and Smith agreed, but there were some significant ways in which they developed a different style in carrying out their vision. Mr. Smith's vision and the projects which exemplified it grew out of a philosophical context

created by other prominent educators of the time. Some of the teachers who were at North Shore during the 1930's and 1940's remember the late night meetings and Mr. Smith reading from an old, tattered book of Colonel Parker's philosophy. (Colonel Parker, by the way, was called the father of progressive education by John Dewey.) Another important philosopher, as far as Smith was concerned, was Alfred North Whitehead. Before examining Smith's vision as influenced by Parker, Dewey and Whitehead, it is important to understand the history of the Country Day concept.

The Country Day Concept is Born

The Country Day concept on which North Shore was founded came into existence at the turn of the century in Baltimore. Families there were questioning whether or not boarding school was the best way to prepare their adolescents for college, much less life. Growing insight in psychology suggested that it was far healthier for the adolescent to come to maturity within the context of a family than in an institution which was rigid and lacking in the normal give and take between the sexes and between generations. On the other hand, there were also values found in the boarding school which were important to maintain. A longer day, for instance, enabled

peers to work, play, eat, and study together and to build an *esprit de corps*.

The idea was first suggested by a Baltimore mother to build a school at the city limits where the air was fresh and the setting close to nature, but where it would still be accessible by public transportation. The children would go for a full day but return to their own homes for the evening meal and for the night. The idea was so well received that by the 1940's there were several hundred Country Day schools throughout the United States.

In order to gain acceptance among the north shore area parents, the School had to prove itself in two major areas:

1. It had to be capable of preparing students for the best colleges (i.e. the Ivy League). The Eight-Year-Study, conducted during the 1930's by the Carnegie Foundation verified that.
2. It had to be capable of building the kind of *esprit de corps* among its students which parents felt was an important experience at the preparatory boarding schools. This particular area was one in which Mr. Smith excelled.

Community

Perry Smith often quoted Parker's belief that "A school is a community. Community life is indispensable to mental and



The Santa Party in the West Gym in 1941.

moral growth." The idea of community is the most basic point in Smith's philosophy of education. However, he didn't allow his students to be content with only the awareness and responsibility for the school community, as important as it was. He continued to remind them of the global community. His particular concern for the community beyond the campus, the global community, will be referred to later.

Mr. Smith used several techniques for creating and maintaining a sense of community. They're called "bonding mechanisms" by anthropologists — ways of cementing relationships among the various groups within the

school community. Smith was concerned not only with the relationships which the students had among themselves and with their teachers, but also with how the students related to their natural environment of the campus. He continually sought ways to expand the close association parents had with the School (which was quite unusual for the time). He was intensely committed to the relationship which he had with his faculty and students, and he constantly promoted ways of stimulating the sense of connection the students developed with the world beyond the School.

Thus, from the very beginning of the School, certain traditions were

established which were meant both to create as well as to express community. Of these, Morning Exercise was the most central. Smith brought the idea from Parker School, where it was considered the center of the day. Every other activity radiated from it.

Morning Ex was the Headmaster's class and was every bit as important as math or science or English. In the early days there were very few programs which were brought in from the outside. It was considered a time for sharing across age and grade lines, bringing in projects and programs from classes or individuals sharing their out-of-school activities with their classmates.

In those days every faculty member was responsible for six to eight Morning Exes a year, and,

lest anyone forget, the drama teacher kept a card file with the date and content of every Morning Ex and who participated. When asked whether or not any faculty members protested, David Corkran, a faculty member from 1926 to 1944, said, "Oh, no. This was expected!"

Morning Ex continues to be important in the 1990's. The school community still comes together to share presentations by classes, individual students, and faculty members, but now they also enjoy a wide range of outside speakers, performers, and films.

Work Day is a tradition that grew out of Dig Day and Arbor Day, which were exactly what their names indicate. A North Shore graduate of 1925 described Mr. Smith coming into classes one day and telling all the children to follow him out behind the building

Work Day — working on the hill where the Music Center of the North Shore is now located. Knollslea Hall, in the background, was later demolished in 1960.



where they dug out old shrubs and weeds. Thus began the first "Dig Day." In the spring was Arbor Day when trees and flowers were planted. Mr. Smith loved to create community by doing tasks that needed to be done. In later years, the two activities were combined and exist today as Work Day. The whole School continues to participate in campus clean-up every autumn. In addition the upper school students and their teachers help senior citizens with their fall yard work — an example of service extending beyond the boundaries of the campus.

Education for Democracy

"The primary gift of God to man is choice — and education should be the presentation of conditions for choice, for the exercise of reason." Mr. Smith used to say he firmly believed that in order to understand democracy, everyone, including the young, must have practice in exercising choice. Student government came into being the very first year of the School's existence. And the town meeting was often held weekly during Morning Ex time.

William Talley, who taught science at the School from 1943 to 1972, tells of an incident that occurred shortly after he came to the School. There was a problem with the high school students playing ball between the Upper School and the back of the auditorium. Many windows were being broken. "How would Perry Smith handle

this?" Talley wondered. "Would he be an authoritarian? Plead his case, or what?"

The issue was brought up at a town meeting which continued over a period of several days as students hashed and rehashed the problem. Mr. Smith literally "sat it out," patiently waiting for them to solve the problem themselves. The decision they finally made was to continue to play ball there, but whoever broke a window would take the responsibility of going to the store, purchasing the glass, and replacing it.

Two or three more windows were broken; the guilty students conscientiously kept their word, but at this point, ball playing in this area mysteriously ceased.

Another incident involved students marking the walls with their pencils as they walked up and down the stairway. The problem was brought up at a town meeting, and after discussing it half an hour or so, the students decided to wash and paint the walls themselves, which they did. There were no more pencil marks in the stairwells.

In spite of a somewhat rocky history, the student council at NSCDS continues to exist and to provide experiential training in democracy.



Importance of the Arts

Mr. Smith referred to the arts as the way of keeping "all the avenues to the soul open and in use." North Shore was almost unique at the time in making sure that all the students were exposed to the arts every year. They were considered essential means for meeting the emotional and spiritual needs of the growing child. The Gilbert and Sullivan operetta was established as a tradition in the mid '20's by Nina Bailey, who taught music at the time, and Mr. Smith. Both of them loved Gilbert and Sullivan. What a bonding effect the yearly operas had and continue to have on the students. After you've been at North Shore awhile, you'll notice what the alumni do when they get together: they burst into Gilbert and Sullivan song!

In the past, everyone in the Upper School was involved in the production of the opera in some capacity. Even the faculty made and gathered props. Mr. Smith worked with the freshmen girls on make-up, dividing them up into squads and instructing them on the fine points of the art. He, himself, would do the make-up for the leads and then take his place in the orchestra pit to play his bass for the performance. There were even years when he would be on stage singing in the chorus. During some of those early years, he also directed the senior class play which was held in the spring.

Athletics

No school day was complete at North Shore without team play in the afternoon. The fact that Perry Smith was a lineman on Harvard's football team might have had something to do with that. He also coached football when he was teaching at Parker. Among the students he coached was Karl Long, who later became the first athletic director at North Shore.

There was no place for stars on North Shore teams. The emphasis was on working with and for the group. In the early days before there were enough students, Smith and the young male faculty members would go out after school and suit up for a scrimmage with the students. Smith believed sports for girls were just as important as they were for boys, and they both competed interscholastically from the very beginning. The problem was that North Shore could not belong to the Illinois High School Association because the girls were competing. North Shore was allowed, however, to play the other independent schools, many of which had girls' sports. The public schools could not even allow their boys' teams to play independent schools which also had girls' teams.

As late as the mid '60's the situation remained the same. At this time, Martin "Mac" McCarty, who assumed responsibilities as the School's athletic director in

1949, testified before the state assembly to allow women to participate in state league competition. Once the public schools allowed their girls to participate in interscholastic sports, they could no longer prevent North Shore from becoming a member of the Illinois High School Association. North Shore is now a member, and our girls and boys compete against public as well as independent school teams.

During the 1970's, state leagues for women were finally initiated, and North Shore can take pride in the role it played in correcting the long-standing discrimination.

Today, athletics continue to be an important part of the educational process. All students in grades six through ten are required to be part of a team each fall.

Global Consciousness

Alfred North Whitehead wrote, "A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth." Mr. Smith was constantly warning faculty and students to beware of "inert ideas." With this in mind, the Toy Shop was firmly established in 1926. Each fall students would begin working with Mr. Bollinger, who taught shop. They made and repaired toys which were then distributed at Christmas time to various settlement houses in Chicago. The Santa Party was the culmination of that project.

During November and December each class would have a turn in bringing their parents to a class dinner and evening of working in the Toy Shop. Again, it was a remarkable bonding process for both parents and students. The students themselves would take the toys into Chicago and deliver them personally to the children.

During the war years Mr. Smith was constantly raising the questions of "thoughtless excesses in a world where other people are suffering." He was referring especially to the extravagant parties that would be held during the winter holidays. In 1946 a European Student Exchange was established as an all-school activity. There were representatives from each homeroom in the Upper School. Each class in the Lower and Middle School worked as a group. Supplies and toys were packed and sent to France, Holland and Czechoslovakia. The fifth grade adopted a Dutch boy under the auspices of the "Save the Children Foundation." In one of the monthly bulletins published by the School that year, a letter from a Netherland headmaster was reprinted. His school had been the recipient of packages from North Shore. He apologized for responding late, having suffered from a nervous breakdown as a result of the strains of war.

In 1949 George Hanford, who was business manager of the School, and who went on to become



The Toy Shop in the early 1950's — Every year toys were created by the children and their parents who worked together in the School shop.

president of the College Board, wrote of establishing a scholarship for foreign students. Today, we have as many as six international students on campus in any year.

In 1957 there was a Hungarian relief clothing drive. In 1958 Dr. Tom Dooley came to visit the School. He had served in the Navy with Larry Aggens, a school parent and former faculty member. Dr. Dooley gave a Morning Ex in which he described his Operation Medico. The students became so enthusiastic that they started a drive to purchase supplies to be sent to Southeast Asia. The School shipped 1200 bars of soap, several dozen babushkas, and five pounds of costume jewelry. The babushkas were to identify the midwives, and the jewelry was meant to be insignias for the nurses.

In 1963 the Lower School set up an exchange program with Point Hope School in Alaska. As a Christmas gift they made a tape recording of Christmas songs and mimeographed 90 song books with their own illustrations to accompany the tape.

During the 1960's, a number of the faculty members were very active in the civil rights movement. Meetings were held at the School in the evenings on the issue of open housing. It was at this time that the first black students came to the School, reflecting Perry Smith's vision for North Shore to enroll students of varied backgrounds, intellectual ability and personal characteristics in order to avoid narrowness in the student body.

Mr. Smith also felt it was important to have physically

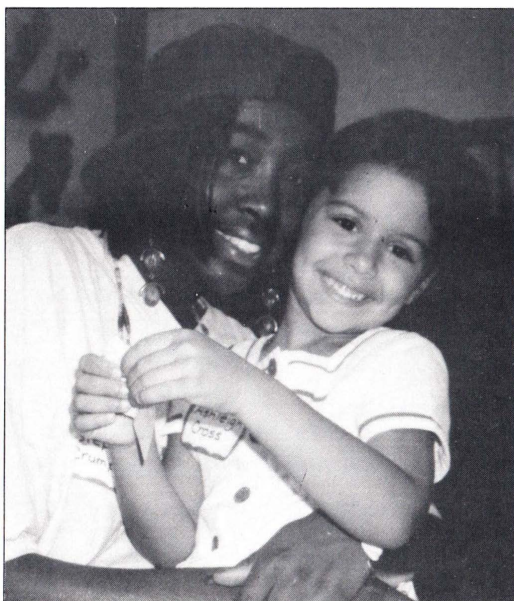
handicapped students present. The most outstanding example was Teddy Glaser, a student during the 1940's, who gradually went blind during his elementary grades and remained here for his high school education. Teddy went on to an outstanding career in the field of computer science. Mr. Smith himself was on the founding Board of Directors of the Hadley School for the Blind.

In 1963 Edward Yeomans, a prominent educator whose father was responsible for bringing Carleton Washburne to Winnetka and whose son taught at North Shore in 1963 and 1964, came to address the Parent Association. In describing his work with the Peace Corps, he made the following comment; "I can't believe that it was ever intended that preparation for college takes

the place of involvement with life." This statement fittingly summarizes Perry Smith's own attitude toward education and his vision for the School. In the spirit of that vision, a visiting fellow comes to the campus each year to speak to the school community on ethical and social issues.

The School's commitment to the highest standards of academic excellence was and is important, as exemplified by the success of North Shore's alumni in higher education. Even more important, however, is the commitment to life, as expressed in Perry Dunlap Smith's vision. Community, democracy, artistic and physical development and global consciousness are the ideals on which North Shore was founded and the principles towards which it continues to strive.

Buddies share happy times together in activities which cross age and grade lines.



The School Historian

Nancy Geyer, now Nancy Geyer Christopher, was a teacher of anthropology and psychology for twelve years at The North Shore Country Day School.

She completed her undergraduate work at Mundelein College and earned her M.A. and Ph.D. from Northeastern Illinois University and Northwestern University. She joined the North Shore faculty in the fall of 1978.

Through the reading of the School's early publications and written records and through conversations with former faculty and students, Dr. Christopher has been able to piece together the moods, thoughts and philosophy of the early years. Her focus is not only the particular history of this School, but, more importantly, how this School fits into the realm of the national education picture and what part it played in the progressive education movement in the early 1900's.

As the School's historian, Dr. Christopher has presented portions of the School's history to the North Shore faculty, parents and students as well as to groups in the outer community. Many years of research have culminated in the writing of a comprehensive history of the School.

Dr. Christopher is the mother of three grown children. Matt attended North Shore during his freshman and sophomore years. Kateri graduated in 1984 and Peter graduated in 1989.

Those interested in the comprehensive history of the School are invited to contact:

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